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LANGUAGE REFORM AND THE PROGRESS OF ENGLISH PEOPLES

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ENGLISH-SPEAKING peoples have accomplished great things in the world's history in the past. They now have the opportunity of rendering a service of the highest value to the whole world, and of benefiting themselves by the act. If the English language were simplified so that it might become the international language, English peoples would profit by the saving in time and labor, and their international relations would be stimulated and aided.

The idea of the English language becoming the world language is far from being a dream. To a certain extent it is the world language now, being more widely spoken than any other tongue, its nearest competitors, the German, French and Spanish languages, being far outclassed. In 1801 the English language was spoken by 21 millions, the German by 30, and the French by 31 millions; by 1901 there had taken place an amazing change in the figures, they then standing English 130, German 84 and French 52 millions. There can be no doubt that after the present war is over, the English-speaking peoples will take an even more prominent place in world history.

The English language has one immense advantage over every other in that it is made up essentially of about equal parts of the languages of the two greatest races of the world, the Teutonic and the Latin. It has, moreover, the finest literature and a magnificent vocabulary admitting of the fullest and most accurate expression. On the other hand, it has several points of weakness, one of which is very grave, namely, its spelling. The language has an excessively large number of irregular forms, it has a rather loose and overlapping set of prepositions, and is unnecessarily inflected as regards subject and predicate agreeing in number. Making these improvements would not be a difficult task at all. A committee formed to represent all classes of society most affected, including business men in both the domestic and foreign trade, newspaper men, authors, scientists, scholars, specialists in spelling reform, typists, stenographers, linotype men, and stenotype operators

could frame a report, which could then be officially adopted and substituted for the present form of the language, very much as many countries adopted metric reform, which at first apparently presented insuperable difficulties in the way of its substitution for the old weights and measures.

The idea of a world language is, of course, not new. We have had Volapük (1879), Esperanto (1887), and since then seven or more artificially constructed tongues for world use. A simplified form of one of the languages now in wide use, with a minimum number of characters, and each character standing always for the same sound, with no unnecessary inflections and irregularities, so that it could be learned with a minimum of effort, would naturally have great advantages over an artificially constructed language.

Heretofore the study of language reform has been confined to scholars, even though many among their number are violently opposed to any change. However, when men like Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Professor William James, Colonel T. W. Higginson, George W. Cable, R. W. Gilder and John Burroughs favor spelling reform, there must be something in it. Now, apparently the scholar reformers from no fault of their own have come about to their wits' end as to what to do next. In their despair these reformers turned to primary education for relief, expecting the children to do what their elders had failed to accomplish. Spelling reform seems to have come to a point where it can neither go forward nor back. Editors, no matter what their personal predilections, are compelled either to ignore the reform altogether or to use the new forms in the most sparing way. Every time a reader accustomed to see "through," for instance, spelled in the usual form comes across the word in some publication in the unfamiliar form thru, he gets an unpleasant shock. Highly educated readers can stand this; it is good for them; but for the masses it is likely to establish an aversion to the new spelling in general. What seems to be needed is that, besides the scholars, large classes of our population, which are vitally interested but do not know of it, should have the whole question brought to their attention in such a way that they will be disposed to make a study of the reform from their own standpoints.

There are three great aspects of this proposed language reform: (1) That of its relation to international matters and the progress of the race already referred to. (2) That of the saving in printed and written matter. If there is a chance for a ten per cent. economy here, then in a country whose printed

matter each year costs more than a billion dollars, over 100 million dollars can be saved. (3) That of the saving in elementary education. The saving here might be even as high as twenty-five per cent. of the children's time. These matters will be discussed a little more fully after the character and amount of the saving has been set forth.

It seems clear that the alphabet adopted should conform to the following requirements: (1) Every sound in the language should be capable of expression by it. (2) Every letter or combination of letters should have but one sound equivalent. (3) The number of characters should not exceed the number now in use, so that they could be put on any typewriter or linotype machine. (4) The accent should be given in printed words. This could be done by some device, as by leaving a slight space before the vowel of the accented syllable when it is not on the first syllable. (5) Words having the same sound with a different meaning and often different spellings should be changed so as not to duplicate each other in sound. This should be done in the interest of clarity of oral speech, and might be accomplished by introducing an additional letter. (6) Double letters should be replaced by single ones, as *runer* for *runner*, except when both letters of a double consonant or vowel are plainly heard in ordinary speech.

The changes just suggested raise the whole question of a natural attitude of mind of the great majority toward reform of any kind; men may be divided generally as well as politically into conservatives and radicals. The majority at first is overwhelmingly on the conservative side, but as the evils become more and more apparent under discussion, larger and larger numbers swing to the radical side. Most men understand a few things well, but the vast majority are conservatives the moment they come upon a matter they have not carefully investigated. Their minds are wrapped in intellectual swaddling clothes, so to speak, and of this fact they are totally ignorant. No one is so foolish as he who accepts palpable untruths on fallacious grounds, and no one is so wise as he who knows what he does not know. Most men would think they understood the subject of language reform when they really do not. The people of America think their system of weights and measures as good as any, whereas people of metric countries know they are wrong. Illustrations of this sort might be given *ad libitum*. In considering language reform, especially, the foregoing must be kept in mind. Even children may be wiser than their elders, as was hinted at by Christ in one place. Children say, The sheeps is in

the field, and The horse runed away. By agreement these forms could be used just as well as those now in current use. If anything were gained by retaining the irregular forms, the case would be different.

When we come to pronunciation, we know that there is a wide variation in the pronouncing of both consonants and vowels, especially vowels. Doubtless the number of distinct vowel sounds now in use might be somewhat reduced by using the same character to represent those so close together as to be difficult to distinguish from each other. The vowel *a* in *dance* is pronounced all the way from short *a* in *hat* to broad *a* in *all*. This shows a natural tendency to shade pronunciations, and ought to indicate the possibility of compressing the number of vowel sounds at least a little.

There are 26 letters in the alphabet, of which 6 are vowels and 21 are consonants, *y* being both a vowel and a consonant, as *y* in *yet* and *y* in *my*. This last fact suggests the possibility of using some of the other consonants in the same way. The desirability of this is apparent when it is remembered that six vowels represent at one time or another sixteen different sounds. If we are to have every sound represented by a single character so as to remove all ambiguity, there will evidently have to be some doubling up in the use of the letters.

Merely to show what is possible, and with no intent to specially advocate the proposals which follow, suppose that *y* and six other letters function both as consonants and vowels, part modified somewhat in form and the others unchanged. By this course there is secured a one-sound-one-letter alphabet which satisfies the conditions already stated. Thus, by cutting a small piece out of the vertical line in *q*, it can answer well for both *qu* in *quit* and *a* in *far* without ambiguity. In case of uncertainty the consonant could be marked. By this simple plan the 62 letters come to represent 33 different sounds.

A somewhat haphazard search showed these 33 sounds now spelled in over 200 different ways, not considering the spelling of proper names. It showed nine of these sounds each spelled in over a dozen ways! Examination discloses that out of the 200 spellings of 33 sounds, perhaps 170 are of more or less common occurrence and must be learned by every one who pretends to read even newspapers. Thus, the difficulty of learning these spellings is more than five times as great as it would be with the one-symbol alphabet, and that on the assumption that it is as easy to learn an absurd spelling as a rational one. Psychological experiments show that it is ten times as hard to learn

disconnected syllables as to learn those found in connected speech. Thus the difficulty of learning these spellings might easily be fifty times as great as to learn the one-sound-one-spelling language. It is almost past belief that English-speaking peoples should not cry out against the infamy of asking generation after generation to learn all this rubbish when it is not in the least necessary.

Examining the Twenty-third Psalm we find that in the ordinary spelling there are 455 letters and in the new form 49 less, or a saving of 10.8 per cent. Similarly the First Psalm shows a saving of 10 per cent. and the Beatitudes 11.1 per cent., the first three stanzas of Longfellow's Psalm of Life 9 per cent.—these all being composed mainly of Anglo-Saxon words. A column of newspaper matter contained 3,556 letters, of which 286 would be saved in the new form, or a little over 8 per cent. It happened here that a large number of proper names appeared, nearly all spelled as they were pronounced, which brought the per cent. down somewhat. Where there is a preponderance of words of Latin origin, the per cent. is lowered, since Latin words are spelled about as pronounced except for double letters and certain endings.

In 1909 the printed matter in this country cost 737 million dollars. Ten per cent. of this sum is close to 75 million. At the present time undoubtedly the value of printed matter must run well over one billion dollars annually, and thus offers a saving of over one hundred million from this source alone. An estimate of the saving from business letters based on the number of pieces of first-class mail, places the saving on them at perhaps ten million annually; we ignore the loss in social letters, as it is hard to estimate this in dollars and cents.

Let us now consider the educational aspect of the subject. When a child starts to school he is already in possession of a very considerable vocabulary. As soon as he can master the sounds of the 26 letters as found in familiar words, he would immediately make available all his knowledge gained through oral language. Instead at this point he must begin to learn by forced memory the large number of common words which he must know in order to read ordinary stories. All his other studies begin by being rational and continue to be rational throughout his course, namely, nature study, science, mathematics, history, etc. Why should language demand the irrational? It comes as a shock to the child's mind when he first meets the irregular spellings. Thus, if he has learned that *o* has a certain sound in the words he has met, he is surprised to

find that the word though is spelled with the ugh tacked on to O.

Probably half the time of the eight years of the elementary course is given to reading, writing and spelling. If this four years could be cut to two by an improved language expression, it would undoubtedly result in two years more of general education for all the children, that is they would all be two years further along in the course than they now are when they leave school. The value of the increased earning power acquired by the more extended education could not possibly be less than two or three hundred million dollars annually.

No great reform was ever instituted that did not meet with difficulties in its way. A word or two concerning the two or three greatest objections to language reform. One of these is that libraries, the product of ages of effort, would be made useless. The answer to this is easy. All persons over ten years of age would know both the old and the new spelling and could read either form, the one as easily as the other. Those under ten, if they wanted to be scholars and a very small percentage of the whole population could read books out of print, would have to learn the old alphabet and spelling. Of course, all important literature, histories, science, and important works of learning would immediately be printed in the new form of the language, so that the masses would not need to use the old language. A second objection to reformed spelling is that the derivation and therefore the meaning of many words would be lost. The reply to this is that perhaps only one or two per cent. of all persons have sufficient education to make this knowledge of any value to them. Dictionaries would naturally give the old spellings instead of the pronunciations as now as parts of the etymologies. The small per cent. could well afford to be willing to look up in the dictionary the derivation of all words they could not recognize. Vast masses of children now look up such words as receive and believe and forthwith forget what they took pains to find out, because it is so easy to be confused in this way, especially for minds that do not hold spellings well.

The third objection, that the plan is impracticable, is the easiest of all to answer. The new form of the language is so much like the old, having precisely the same sounds, so many letters used with exactly the same value, and is so simple, that trained linguists could actually learn its elements in a few minutes and read the language with facility in a few hours. The ordinary constant reader would be able to master the alpha-

bet in a couple of hours, and with a few days of practice would be reading the new form with considerable ease. Other readers would shade off into all gradations of progress as now with the old form. Learning the new language would be like learning a foreign language and would occupy a distinct pocket in the brain, so to speak. It would thus be possible with a brief period of preparation to actually pass over to the use of the new form exclusively. However, a period in which both forms of the language would be in use, the new in a limited way would be advisable.

In this intervening period the international language would be employed for all international correspondence. Special dictionaries and instruction books would have to be prepared for all the important languages. In all our school dictionaries in use, the new alphabet would be used as a key to pronunciation, and the new spelling would be given as the pronunciation form of spelling of all words different from the old form. Then the children would be taught the new form of the language as a regular part of their education. Persons of maturer age would naturally want to know all about this new language, and would gradually become more and more familiar with it. In truth it would be no more difficult to read than many dialect books now found in our literature. When the immense advantage of the new form of the language over the old should come to be generally understood and the time became ripe, the transition could be made to the new form, preferably by government enactment.

Certainly more discussion is needed of this question which has been shown to involve the loss of something like millions of dollars annually. We have had now for some time a great cry for more efficiency, and our merchants and manufacturers scour the earth to find means of saving. They are trying to introduce more system everywhere. Yet here is a loss of energy and a lack of system, and one that involves not merely the affairs of every merchant and manufacturer, but of practically everybody, and still no effort is being put forth to even investigate this subject. If all the classes vitally interested could but take hold of this reform which our scholars alone have brought to so lame and impotent a conclusion, a new era would dawn.